

## Karen Women Preserve Culture Amid Refugee Crisis

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In a quiet community center in Perth, Australia, Karen women gather to weave traditional cloth, preserving cultural heritage while healing from past trauma. The weekly sessions provide more than just a social activity; they are a vital link to the history and identity of an ethnic group displaced by decades of conflict in Myanmar.

Sisterlay Toe, a 47-year-old member of Perth's Karen community, described the significance of the craft. "I use the fabric to make clothes for myself, and when I wear them, I feel happy and proud," she said. Weaving has long been central to Karen cultural identity, passed down through generations as a means to maintain tradition and memory.

The Karen, also known as Kayin, originate from Myanmar and Thailand. Many fled violence following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, which intensified a decades-long civil conflict. The military has been fighting pro-democracy groups and ethnic armed organizations, resulting in thousands of deaths and displacements. Earlier this year, earthquakes in Myanmar and the surrounding region further worsened conditions, with reports indicating thousands of deaths, though exact figures vary.

A recent United Nations report documented instances of "systematic torture" in Myanmar's military detention facilities, identifying senior officials allegedly involved. The military denies committing atrocities, claiming efforts to maintain security and blaming unrest on "terrorists." Karen communities remain among the most affected by ongoing violence.

Graham Thom, advocacy coordinator for the Refugee Council of Australia, noted that more than 100,000 displaced Karen live in nine makeshift camps along the Myanmar-Thai border. "Those in the camps are dependent on NGOs and aid for survival, education, and food," Thom said. He warned that recent reductions in international aid may have worsened conditions, leaving refugees in precarious situations.

A coalition of Karen groups stated that even before aid cuts, food supplies were reportedly insufficient for basic survival. Thom urged increased support, emphasizing Australia's potential role in restoring humanitarian aid to these communities.

Many Karen have resettled in Australia, finding safety and opportunities unavailable in Myanmar. Mu Lay SongSaeng, a Karen woman living in Perth, highlighted the safety and opportunities she now experiences. "We don't need to be afraid of the military or flee because of civil war," she said. Despite this, traditional skills like weaving remain at risk of disappearing.

To address this, SongSaeng revitalized a group called "Weave to Thrive" in Mirrabooka, northern Perth, two years ago. Using handheld looms made from recycled timber, participants create colorful fabrics that honor Karen traditions. Red is said to symbolize bravery, while blue and white hold cultural significance according to Karen tradition. Beyond

preserving heritage, the initiative may allow women to earn a modest income through the sale of their handicrafts.

“In our culture, weaving is more than a craft; it is a way to heal and connect,” SongSaeng said. “Every Friday, this room comes alive. The women enjoy themselves and share joy while keeping our culture alive.”

Through such programs, Karen women in Australia continue to safeguard their history, support each other, and raise awareness of the humanitarian crisis affecting their people abroad.